

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE SKELETON HAND. OR, THE SHADOWERS OF NICK CARTER'S DETECTIVE SCHOOL.



By the Author of
"Nick Carter"

THE COIN PASSER HAD CUT HIMSELF OPEN AND THE AIR BAG THAT HAD FRONTED HIM WENT DOWN LIKE A
SINKING ROOF.

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A HOT SHOT.

"Drop that!"

"Never!"

"You shall!"

Whiz—whang!

A knife blade cut the air like a flash of descending lightning.

The hand of Bob Ferret was the target aimed at—Bob Ferret engaged on his first great case in behalf of the United States Government.

The scene was the interior of a little notions store located on a side street in Washington city.

Into it Nick Carter's indomitable pupil had one minute previously followed a young man he had been shadowing for an hour.

This sinister-faced fellow now confronted him—snarling murderously, gritting his gleaming teeth with malice and hate.

The stake was a coin—that coin the first link of evidence in one of the most intricate and remarkable counterfeiting exploits that had ever puzzled and baffled the government secret service.

The fellow had tendered it—the suspicious store lady had refused it.

Bob had caught a sight of its face as it lay on the counter.

"Coinage of 1893"—that was enough for him.

He had put out his hand to seize it. Like a flash the fellow turned.

If ever he read determination in a human face, he read it here.

If ever his alarmed senses traced "detective" in resolute eye, sure, firm lips, nerves steady as iron, they traced them now.

"Give it up?"

"No!"

Then the whirl of a knife, its descent, poised squarely for the sinewy hand outspread across the tell-tale piece of money.

Bob saw the keen weapon gleam—he shot out his fingers fan shape.

It was a hazardous risk, but Bob took the chances.

Chink!

The knife point shivered, dulled, slid across the counter.

It had met the coin instead of wood or flesh.

It ridged the one, it shavvaged the other, grazing like a razor.

The coin slipped along with it.

"Help! murder! thieves!"

DIAMOND DICK, JR., HAS MANY HAIRBREADTH ESCAPES.

The storelady distracted Bob's attention by the affrighted scream as the knife whanged toward her.

The man improved the moment—he secured the coin.

"Get out!" he shouted, sweeping past his opponent, furiously massing his strength for a whirl at the door.

"Stay in!" spoke Bob, calmly.

"Perdition!"

Its key had been turned and was now reposing in the young detective's pocket.

For a second the baffled fellow panted, glared, like a wolf entrapped.

Then he did a venturesome thing, an unexpected thing, that made Bob quake and the storelady faint sheer away.

The door was single and formed of one light of heavy plate glass.

Through it the man dashed unhesitatingly.

Out on the pavement he landed with a frightful rush and clatter.

The denuded woodwork, pronged and point-armed, still showering glittering splinters, framed Bob, stationary.

The man had seized a scale scoop and with it had protected face and head in his rash dive.

"Here he comes!"

"What's this?"

"There he goes!"

"Zounds!"

Passersby shrank at the startling appearance of the wild figure dashing out and then past them.

In an instant he had set the previously placid capital street ablaze with commotion and excitement.

"Catch that man!"

Bob made the air ring with the vibrating words.

He was not shouting to the winds, and he knew it.

He had undertaken the present phase of the case "in harness," and his "partner" was waiting outside—Roxy.

In a new field, the girl wonder of Nick Carter's detective school was arrayed in new guise.

She had been one of the careless, happy-hearted "little girls" skimming the sidewalk on roller skates, during the four squares' shadowing.

She was such now, waiting her next

point a few rods down the pavement, only that she was holding one end of a skipping rope for some tripping midgets.

The crash sent Roxy's keen eyes instantly boring like gimlets.

The shout in Bob's tones was a clear order.

"Catch that man!"

"Yes!" spoke Roxy, promptly, to herself, and—prepared.

The running fellow was coming full tilt at the crowd of children.

All saw and all scurried—save one.

"Let go!" spoke that exception, sharply, and as the other end of the rope was dropped, Roxy looped it at her side.

She played the scrambling, affrighted girl to perfection as the fugitive sped toward her.

This threw the nimble runner completely off his guard.

He saw a clear course, a convenient corner, near ahead—a pursuer thirty seconds late at starting point to the rear.

"Out of my way!" he snarled at Roxy, as he shot near her and tried to give her a push.

"Don't get in mine! Stop!"

The fellow uttered an absolute scream.

It was a curious mixture of amazement, fright, rage and pain.

Across him plump the nervy girl detective had flung the skipping rope, lasso fashion.

It staggered him for a moment, slipped his hands to his waist, and—held.

A quick, savage glance told him that scare tactics would not avail him here.

Courage, animation, almost a sense of enjoyable excitement, were to be traced in Roxy's clear-cut features.

"If he was one, she's another!" panted the man. "Same breed—I'm scotched!"

He made one effort to lift the loop and throw it off his head—one to back and drop it past his feet.

Roxy was too cute for him. Her spry, dodging manœuvres baffled the exploit.

"Come on, then!" he bawled, hissing.

"I'll do just that!"

There was some eight feet swing to the rope—Roxy did not try to hold back.

She could slightly impede the man's flight as it was, and that was all the

DIAMOND DICK, JR. CAN'T BE BEAT.

clever sprinter, Bob Ferret, would ask, once he got his paces.

The fellow probably realized that he was by no means certain of escape.

Roxy watched his every move. She traced something suspicious in the rapidity with which he shot one hand to an inside pocket.

It came out clinched—through the locked fingers Roxy caught a bright yellow gleam.

"The bad money!" she soliloquized instantly.

The race was now a queer one. Roxy glided forward as smoothly and rapidly along the even pavement as a boy on a sled "hitch beliind."

The man made a sharp veer—rather a circling swoop.

His hand went up. Roxy had both of hers in use, holding each an end of the rope, so as to be on the alert for any evading trick on the fugitive's part.

She could not prevent the fling he man hastily made—that of a whole handful of coin squarely at the yawning mouth of a curb orifice leading to the street sewer.

She saw the man's point—to get rid of incriminating evidence of his guilt.

He was a deft thrower—the pieces flew at the opening, disappeared down it as if shot from a gun.

All except one, and as this struck the stone, tanged, rebounded and rolled into the street, the man wavered.

"It's evidence, maybe," breathed Roxy. "Then—mine!"

She dropped one end of the rope and swung free.

A sliding dart brought her up to the coin, but its recent possessor at the same moment.

Both scrambled, both almost fell—Roxy got it.

The man made a grab for her hand.

"You don't!" declared Roxy.

"But I do—you vixen!"

With a click the coin went past Roxy's pearly teeth—her lips plumped closely after it.

"Drat you!" hissed the man. "I'll tear your tongue out! I'll—wow!"

His brutal fingers had forced Roxy's lips apart, but he had got his reward.

The minute his big, boring finger

forced her teeth open, down they clicked.

"Let go!" bawled the man, in excruciating pain. "I'll give it up!"

An erratic blow grazed her head, but Roxy never budged.

Bob would soon be due—if she could hold on two minutes longer she would have scored the victory.

A whistle cut the air.

Roxy could not look back, but she saw the fellow she had pinned change color rapidly.

"Bob's call for the dog!" she told herself.

One of her own expert pets had been a third dumb partner in their present enterprise.

She had missed the animal, and fancied he must be keeping tab on her colleague when he entered the store.

At all events, the signal was for her canine friend, and Roxy expected something to happen.

It did.

With a roar and a jerk she could not resist her captive tore his finger free.

Roxy got to her feet to see him speeding along the walk.

A darting flash, the dog pursued.

There was a growl as man and animal met, and then a ripping, tearing sound.

With one great mouthful of the man's coat in his jaws the animal fell free, darted up again, and disappeared.

Roxy ran forward in amazement, for the fugitive, quelling a shriek of terror after a glance of satisfaction, sped around the corner.

"Bob!"

The two novices nearly ran into one another.

"Down, there!" panted Bob, pointing through an open coal hole.

"The dog?"

"Yes."

"Get him."

"But the man—"

"It means the man, don't it?"

Bob dropped from sight. His hands came up holding the dog, unhurt and still clinging to the fragment of cloth.

Roxy tore it from its jaws only to wave it and hold it to its nose.

"After him—after him, good fellow!"

she coaxed, trailing it where the man's bleeding finger left an occasional trace. "Wait here, Bob."

"Hold on——"

As well call to a flash!

Bob, lifting himself with some difficulty through the orifice in the sidewalk, saw two flying forms.

One was the dog, speeding around the next corner, its nose to the pavement.

The other was Roxy. A red-painted fire buggy had just sped into view.

The girl detective made one slide toward it, grasped its rear axle, and was whirled out of sight.

When Bob got to the corner, fugitive and pursuers had disappeared.

"If Roxy has struck the lead I can afford to wait," he determined, taking to the shelter of a doorway away from an onpressing crowd. "If she hasn't she'll lose no time getting back."

Bob waited ten minutes, then he took a peep past his shelter.

"Hello!" he voiced—"how shall I read this oracle, I wonder?"

Roxy was returning at quite a leisurely pace—the dog trotting at her heels looked not a whit disappointed.

She smiled radiantly as she came in sight of Bob.

"Where's your man?" interrogated the latter, quickly.

"He'll keep!"

"Then he didn't slip you?"

"Us, Bob—the dog and me—no."

"He's——"

"Good as caught."

"Which means?"

"That I know where to find him when wanted."

"Capital!"

"Most of his coins went into that sewer."

"Too bad!"

"But here's a sample."

Bob's eye brightened as Roxy produced a five-dollar gold piece.

He examined the date speedily and weighted it.

"Good!" he commended. "We've got our start—sure, Roxy!"

"Yes, and I think I see our finish. I certainly ran the man home. When he is

wanted—Bob, five o'clock!" Roxy interrupted herself as a bell tolled the hour.

"That's true. We mustn't miss our appointment."

Bob led the way rapidly to the next street, found a cab, gave the address of a small hotel, and they were soon at it.

The apartment they entered a moment later was one of a suite—its sitting-room. A cheerful series of welcomes ran the rounds of its occupants.

Nick Carter's detective school had certainly been transferred to Washington—temporarily, at least.

Jack Burton, Buff Hutchinson, Aleck White and Larry Moore looked up quickly from unpacking various professional appurtenances from their satchels.

"All here?" hailed Bob, running his eyes over his colleagues in order.

"All here," piped a cheery chorus—"on time!"

"Even the dog," put in Buff.

"Good thing, too!" nodded Roxy, brightly. "He's made the first point—gives us a clue to run down directly after we've seen——"

Tap-tap!

"Some one at the door," spoke Bob, going thither.

The others looked expectant and eager during a brief whispered conversation at its threshold.

Bob admitted the visitor, closing the door after him.

"Fellows," he said, and his glance included Roxy, "a representative, on business, from the United States Treasury."

CHAPTER II.

THE SKELETON HAND.

The man Bob Ferret introduced as so important a personage took a quick-witted survey of the interesting group.

"The famous detective school?" he half murmured.

"Yes," nodded Bob.

"Glad to meet!" bowed the visitor.

"Five of you, and Miss——"

"Plain Roxy," smiled the girl detective.

"Heard of you! All business, you people, I can see that, so—short stories!"

The man was right. He could see business from the word go, sharp and progres-

sive, in every one of the expectant, intelligent faces before him.

The little coterie was far less impressed with this man's important personality than his real mission.

"Call me 'Sixteen,' for convenience," he suggested. "I came from—the government."

Bob bowed as calmly as if used to receiving government clients every day in the year.

"You come from Mr. Nick Carter," proceeded the man.

Bob bowed again, but quite condescendingly, as if that royally famous name was well worth being proud of.

"I was commissioned to write to Mr. Carter a week ago at the solicitation of several national departments," proceeded "Sixteen." "The services of some expert, some more than ordinary professional, were in sore request."

"And, therefore, his," mumbled Bob.

"Mr. Carter announced that he was out of active service."

Bob nodded.

"But that his detective school was quite the contrary."

"Should say so!" remarked Aleck, with an admiring glance at Bob.

"Just," simply quoted Buff, who envied Jack Burton his giant muscles, and therefore focused his enthusiasm on the young athlete.

"He stood sponsor for all you might do!" went on the treasury agent.

"We'll try never to disappoint him," promised Bob.

"Said you had quite outlearned the master."

"Mr. Carter puts it strong because he likes us," bluntly observed Jack.

"That you could do all that he might do—that you knew his methods expertly. In fact," rounded out the speaker, eloquently, "he vouched for you, guaranteed you, offered to designate you as his representatives."

"So, we moved down here," observed practical Aleck, pawing over his great albums of "noted criminals."

"In a body!" smiled Bob. "We're quite a machine when we get going, of which each fellow with his specialty is a practical working part."

"What's yours, might I ask?" insinuated the agent, with quite innocent interest.

"Brains!" promptly vouchsafed Roxy, her eyes flashing enthusiastically on her chum and hero. "They've all got that, mister—'cept me."

"You must have something that answers for them, Roxy!" intimated Bob, very positively.

"Judging from the number of hard places she's helped us out of—I should say so!" interpolated Jack.

"Oh, that's luck!" claimed Roxy, modestly.

"Call it what you will," spoke the treasury agent, "your record makes you the people for me—Mr. Carter's recommendation clinches it for keeps. You know your business. He wrote me that. I have not come here to suggest."

"No?" insinuated Bob.

"But to explain."

"Yes, sir?" nodded big-eyed Aleck, all attention.

"Or, rather, recapitulate."

"Go on," murmured Bob, courteously.

"As we wrote Mr. Carter, and as he has undoubtedly told you, the various departments at Washington—treasury, war, state, even agriculture—sometimes strike some very knotty problems."

"As how?" asked Roxy.

"Crimes, frauds, swindles, mysteries. The world is full of crooks. The sleek ones often make the national capital their stamping ground, plan a bold grab, take a big trick—and it's a big one when they do corner it—and beat us out because our secret service men are so well known."

Bob saw the point of this argument clearly.

"There are now," continued the narrator, "half a dozen cases shelved, muddled or abandoned, which have absolutely defied the efforts of our best detective experts."

The announcement made more than one eye glow with hungry professional zeal.

"We propose to turn the same over to you, to see what you can do with them."

"Absolutely?" stipulated Bob.

"Absolutely," assented the treasury agent, "without qualification. The most

pressing is in my own special department."

"Which we are to tackle first?" queried Bob.

"As I wrote Mr. Carter. Simply, some one is flooding the country with a peculiarly dangerous five-dollar gold counterfeit."

"Like that?" asked Bob, quietly.

He spun across the table the coin Roxy had saved from the lot hurled into the sewer.

The agent started a trifle at the pat presentation.

He inspected the coin critically. Then he said:

"Like that. Where did you get it?"

"From the man who is passing them."

"Pretty quick work, that, isn't it?"

"Not at all," answered Bob. "We knew the surface details of this case, and having two hours to wait for you——"

"Got into practice, just like the baseball fellows tossing the sphere to limber up before a game," suggested Roxy.

"You mean you know the man who is passing these?"

"One of them, sure," assented Bob.

"Who is he?"

"We can tell you his name later, if you want to know."

"Oh! you haven't got him, then?"

"Yes, we have!" interrupted Roxy. "I know just where we can lay our hands on him."

"Then, why——" began the agent, excitedly.

"Don't we 'pinch' him?" queried Bob.

"Yes."

"We don't want to scare away the whole covey just to get a stray specimen."

"I see."

"It's our way, you understand?" suggested Jack.

"I'm not interfering—I'm not criticising," declared Sixteen, hastily. "You take your own plans. But you're good ones—striking the trail direct so soon! We've done that ourselves, though, several times. We've bagged a dozen men passing the queer, but that ended it."

"How ended it?" asked Bob.

"They turned out small fry—second-hand. Couldn't get to head centre."

"Ah!"

"You see this coin is very perfect?" went on the agent.

"I notice that," admitted Bob. "Except for the feel and weight, it's the cleanest cut I ever saw."

"Know why?" interrogated the agent, animatedly, and Bob discerned that he was leading up to some important disclosure.

"Because an expert made the dies, I should say."

"Exactly. My friends, those coins are produced directly from government dies!"

"Aha!" commented Buff.

"How is that?" pursued Bob.

"That's what's troubling us. About a year ago a rich haul was made from one of the treasury storerooms. Some one broke in and carried away a lot of plunder, the absence of which worries us badly."

"The die that makes that coin—among it?" guessed Bob, promptly.

"You've struck it. It seems that some signatures, bond plates, and a lot of other official paraphernalia likely to be very dangerous property in criminal hands, had been stored in a sub-cellар apartment. Tried to place them. Gave it up—hoped they were simply lost, mislaid, or abandoned after being taken."

"When did you find out your mistake?" asked Bob.

"A month ago, when these coins began to appear."

"They are made from the missing treasury die?"

"Positively."

"Here?"

"We are inclined to judge right here in Washington."

"Why not brought to the surface before?"

"There's the mystery. Either the thief was sick, frightened, or he wanted to take time preparing a metal that, with this exquisitely perfect impress, would almost deceive the department itself."

"It's a great graft!" murmured Buff, speculatively.

"No!" sharply dissented the agent.

"That isn't troubling us a bit."

Bob looked somewhat surprised at this blunt paradoxical statement.

"No," repeated Sixteen, "that is the least of our troubles. The banks can be warned, the people posted to look out for this especial coin."

"Fives of '93," nodded Bob.

"Exactly."

"Yes, that's easy."

"But the other stuff—the signatures, the bond plates—really! so great would be the complication if the holders got at work with those, that the Secretary of the Treasury has seriously meditated the recall of entire issues, whole series."

"I begin to understand, said Bob, soberly, reflective. "It is not the coin passers you care about."

"Quite secondary."

"But the man who engineers the whole brilliant project?"

"That's it!"

"You want to strike at him."

"It is vital. I am authorized to offer you, for this case alone—"

The treasury agent leaned forward impressively.

He whispered a sum in Bob's ear the munificent amount of which was quite sensational.

"And cheap at the money!" he declared, with effusiveness.

"Oh! we'll find your man," promised Bob, easily.

"I certainly hope so!" murmured the anxious agent, "but you are so confident—"

"Because we never missed yet, mister!" explained Roxy.

"It will be a big card for you—for myself."

"And now," said Bob, "as to the man—"

"Ah, yes, as to the man!" sighed the agent, blankly.

"You don't know who he is?"

"Wish I did!"

"Don't even suspect?"

"How can we? He left not a trace—that is," corrected Sixteen, spurring up suddenly, "not until yesterday."

"What's that!" sharply pronounced Bob, who did not like vagueness.

"What I say."

"Until yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Then you found a trace?"

"I can't exactly say that," demurred Sixteen, slowly.

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that yesterday, accidentally, quite unexpectedly, I made a remarkable discovery."

"In line with this case?"

"In direct line with the theft of the coin dies and the bond plates, yes."

"What?"

The treasury agent got up here. He was evidently excited and restive.

He started to speak, then he checked himself, made another break, and blurted out:

"No, I won't describe! You're no red-tape workers—you're chain lightning, I can see that. I want you to inspect for yourselves."

"Inspect?" pressed Bob.

"What?" queried Jack, very much interested.

"What I found. It's a discovery, as I say, quite accidental, but it tells just how the theft was committed."

"Good—we're getting on!" commented Bob Ferret.

"I've said nothing to anybody—I haven't disturbed even a speck of dust."

"Why, say!" encouraged Bob, heartily, "you're the right kind!"

"I just said to myself, 'Nick Carter's slick ones are coming—I'll turn the whole matter over to them, fresh, unpawed, just as I ran across it.'"

"Excellent!" nodded Bob. "Now, then, what is it?"

"Come and see."

"All of us?"

"It'll be an object lesson, I fancy."

"Where is it?"

"Under the United States Treasury."

"Whew!" whistled the absorbed Buff, excitedly.

"Great beginning!" murmured Jack.

"The right stuff—sure!" nodded impressionable Larry.

The treasury agent took up his hat.

He briefly and rapidly described where they would meet him in half an hour.

At the end of that time Nick Carter's six interested detectives found themselves amid the most unique environment of their career.

Quite casually and cautiously, and by

different entrances, they had gained admittance to the treasury building, as directed.

Now they were grouped together, and being led along a narrow passageway quite under the ground floor of the main structure.

Sixteen was in the van with a lighted lantern.

When he came to a halt it was in a little partitioned off storeroom.

"There's the shelf where the stuff I described was stored," he indicated, pointing.

"A year ago?" murmured Bob.

"When last seen."

"And missed?"

"About a month later."

"I see."

"We supposed it had been got at from this corridor—a sneak, the collusion of some attache."

"Wasn't it?"

"No."

"You've found that out?"

"Beyond the vestige of a doubt. Now follow me."

The agent pushed open a door. It led into a place unused because floorless and damp—a sort of waste space made so by the exigencies of the construction of the sub-foundation.

He came at the back of the shelf whence the material described had been removed.

Without effort he pried a board free.

"Just a reach through and help yourself!" he explained.

"That's easy," nodded Bob.

"Here's where the trick was done."

"From outside?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"You'll know, in a minute! I've traced how the fellow got in. That corner yonder has a drain. He got into the drain in some way, got his stuff, crept out and away."

"He was bold."

"Then he came back for more."

"You're getting a great tracer, if you can prove all this!" commented Bob.

"The second time he didn't get in," proceeded the treasury agent.

"No?"

"No," asserted the speaker, positively.

"And why not?"

"He had pried out of plumb a stone encircling a pipe. The second time the stone tipped. It came down with crushing force directly across his wrist."

Bob could tell from the narrator's fluttering manner that he was working up to a definite climax.

"The stone clamped that man's arm as if built to do it," went on the agent.

"He couldn't get free?"

"He was in a trap."

"What did he do?"

A start went the rounds, vivid, intense, at the extraordinary reply.

"He cut off his hand."

"Ugh!" shuddered Roxy.

"Tragic!" breathed Jack, worked up, but watchful.

"He left it behind him."

All this time the agent had been moving toward the stone he described.

He seemed to know the value of a dramatic finale, for he held his lantern as if ready at the proper moment to flash it like a calcium when the climax was reached.

"How do you know all this?" demanded Bob, half incredulously.

"Because—there is the hand in question!"

Flash!

A bright focus spread sharply.

It outlined, as the man had promised, the one great clue to the famous treasury steal.

A skeleton hand!

CHAPTER III.

ROXY'S WHITE MICE.

Nick Carter's young detectives stood transfixed.

They had faced many a tragic spectacle in their lives, but probably never before one so essentially dramatic and sensational as the present one.

Here, amid the great vaults of the vast treasure storehouse of the nation, a quick lantern flash had presented the most remarkable clue ever put into their hands.

Buff went all to pieces with excitement.

"Look!" he gulped.

There was something worth looking at.

The hand maintained the rigid pose which it had held for twelve long months.

It filled a narrow round cut in the massive stone block which must have crushed the bones of the wrist before it was cut off.

Bob's vivid imagination could depict the lonely hour of terror that its owner must have endured before he worked his courage up to a point that must have tested extraordinary nerve and powers of endurance.

"There's your clue!" spoke the treasury agent, solemnly, and he looked solemn.

"It's a good one!" nodded Bob, in a business-like way.

"What are you going to do?"

"Find its owner."

"Oh!"

Sixteen acted a trifle disappointed.

"Don't make much fuss over it!" keen-eared Roxy caught his slow mutter.

"It's Bob's way," she whispered—"but he's doing a power of thinking!"

Bob was.

As the leader of the school, his was the privilege and province to make a first move.

He took the lantern from the agent's hand and advanced toward the gruesome memento of a mysterious national crime.

"No baby, the owner of that hand," insinuated Jack.

"Well, hardly."

"And no child's play tracing him."

"An investigation will tell. I thought I noticed something!"

Bob with his cap flecked a great ridge of dust off from the skeleton outline.

"Oh!" uttered Roxy, spontaneously.

"A spark!" said quick Larry.

The third finger of the hand now showed a circle of gold.

Prominently attached, plainly visible was a setting.

It held a nugget of flame—a diamond almost as big as a hazel nut.

"Two points already!" declared Bob to Jack.

"Yes, no pauper this mysterious treasury thief."

"And sporty—the ring's worth a handsome something. Can you get me a box?" asked Bob, turning to the agent.

The hand was carefully worked into a pasteboard receptacle fished up from some rubbish.

Bob detached the ring and put it in his pocket.

Then, applying the cover to the box containing the skeleton hand, he pointed beyond the round aperture the gruesome memento had just filled.

"Anything worth looking at there?" he queried.

"Nothing," answered Sixteen, promptly. "The drain is a broad pipe twelve feet long. Ends under some broken flagging, which, falling in, has filled up the break."

"Very well. We're through, then, I guess."

Bob acted and talked so cool the agent looked dissatisfied—the young detective's remark amounted to a tacit dismissal.

"That's all you want of me?" he queried.

"Why, my friend! Isn't it enough?"

"Sort—I sort of feel second fiddle!"

"On the contrary, you're big bass viol, snare drum and orchestra leader combined!" declaimed Bob with honest approbation. "All? You've given us a clear and strong a lead as I ever struck."

The treasury agent brightened up and got quite chatty by the time they reached the open air again.

He looked wistfully after Bob, however, as the detective group began to scatter.

"You're going to make it—I can see that!" he muttered.

"We've got lots of hope!" smiled Bob. "Wish you was one of us? Don't fear—you shall come in at the windup and score full credit. You're too good a man to leave out in the cold, you are!"

"Bob! You've got a way of making everybody feel comfortable," commented Roxy, as they started back for the hotel.

"Have I?" nodded Bob, but absently.

"Although you're getting grum and grim as an old fossil!" added Roxy pointedly. "Why can't you talk with a fellow?"

"Because I'm thinking, Roxy," replied Bob. "Isn't there need?"

"Oh, I don't know!"

"The clue—that skeleton hand——"

"How about mine—and the dog's?" corrected Roxy, promptly. "I wouldn't go back to that mysterious old hand! My man's right in view, if you only want to follow him up."

"He's only small fry, Roxy, and we're after the big mogul of the whole scheme, you know."

"Mayn't my man lead us right up to your 'great mogul,' just the same!" demanded the persistent little lady.

"Oh! we'll take him up later—we shan't drop him, by any means."

"I won't!" declared Roxy, with positiveness.

She proved her words ten minutes after reaching the hotel.

The girl detective had gone to her own room, and Bob, after a cursory inspection of the treasury clues, had started Jack out on an important side line covering the same, and the rest of the boys to their supper, when Roxy tapped at the door and pushed it open slightly.

"I'm going out, Bob," she announced.

"Alone?"

"Yes. No harm if I look up a little closer the fellow I ran down this afternoon, is there?"

"Not a bit of it, but don't get into trouble."

"I shan't."

"And what have you got there?"

Roxy held a handkerchief in her hand in a way that caused the observing Bob to at once discern that it contained something uncommon.

"Oh! two of my pets," smiled Roxy.

"What two?"

Roxy threw back a fold of the dainty piece of cambric.

"You're two white mice!" stared Bob.

"Yep!"

"I don't see—"

"Bob," declared Roxy, seriously, "I've got an idea!"

"And they help out?"

"I think they're going to."

"Concerning the coin passer you chased down?"

Before Roxy could answer Jack came tearing down the hall interruptingly, and the girl detective darted away on her mission.

Jack had the box containing the skeleton hand under his arm.

"Well?" interrogated Bob, as it was placed on the table and the hall door closed.

"Found out," reported Jack.

"Go ahead."

"I went to the anatomist's with the hand."

"What does he say?"

"The owner of that hand is about thirty-five years old, fair complexion, above the average height, slim and wiry, and a man of idle habits."

"Good for science!" commended Bob. "So much for our mysterious friend's personnel. Now for the fellow's name."

"Eh?" exploded Jack.

"That's the next step, isn't it?" asked Bob.

"The man's name?"

"Exactly."

"You expect to learn that?"

"Got to have it, haven't we?"

"Why—"

"And I think we will, inside of the next hour," predicted Bob.

"You must have been working since I left you?" suggested Jack.

"Hard as I know how?" answered Bob. "See here."

Bob passed around the table to where, on a piece of black velvet, lay the diamond circlet he had removed from the skeleton hand.

A powerful magnifying glass rested beside it.

"There's a tracing, inscription, inside of that ring," he remarked.

"You'd find it if any one did," enthused Jack.

"I did find it. See if you can read it."

Jack held the circlet to the light and focused the glass upon it.

"Wealth, Trust, Order," he reported.

"That's a funny combination!"

Bob nodded, sat down, and pulled toward him a pile of photograph albums.

They were Aleck's property. Aleck was the librarian and historian of the school, so to speak.

Of a studious and thoughtful rather than an investigating and active trend of mind, his professional employment had

latterly been of a clerical character complete.

The volumes in question held photographs of every known criminal, with a brief but comprehensive epitome of his record underneath the portrait.

Bob began scanning these books. While Jack was speculatively regarding the ring, he ran over the index.

From A to W Bob's probing finger traced a course—there he stopped, read a name, and turned to the page indicated opposite.

"Slight, you said the anatomist reported the owner of that skeleton hand to be?" he suddenly broke forth animatedly.

"Yes," nodded Jack. "You've found out something more, Bob?"

"I guess I have."

"Fitted the hand?"

"To a name, if that ring goes for anything. Thirty-five years old?"

"Yes."

"Fair complexion?"

"That's the report."

"Now, then, what does that ring say?"

"Wealth, Trust, Order."

"In other words, the initials are W. T. and O."

"Ah, I see what you're getting at!" exclaimed Jack. "Those are the initials of the owner's name?"

"No, initials in the owner's name."

"What's the difference?"

"Vast!"

"How?"

"They are the alternate letters in a man's name."

"Explain?"

"W. T. O."

"Go ahead."

"Supply a letter after each initial."

"Can't do that—in a second."

"How would A, S and N fit?"

"Watson!"

"Precisely. See here, Jack—I feel pretty sure I have found the owner of the skeleton hand."

"That's him?" interrogated Jack eagerly, scanning the portrait and description in the book.

"That's the man," affirmed Bob convincingly, "and there's the crime that made him famous."

The picture which faced the two young

detectives certainly answered wonderfully to the anatomist's description of the owner of the skeleton hand.

The initial coincidence gave Bob's supposition immense support as well.

"Telegraph Nick Carter at once," he ordered.

"About what?"

"The record and whereabouts of Duffield Watson, the celebrated Western bank sneak."

Jack lingered for a moment, interested in reading the description of the picture Bob had fastened on as the counterfeit presentment of the man who had robbed the United States Treasury.

"He's the fellow who made the big grab for the imperial jewels on show at the Paris Exposition!" he murmured.

"Yes, with his famous red dog—a trained pet that penetrated the glass safe and nearly got away with the plunder," explained Bob.

"We'll make a try on him, eh?" queried Jack.

"Soon as we hear from New York. Duffield Watson and his red dog!—there's the watchword for Nick Carter's detective school till we run down the owner of the skeleton hand."

"Bob!"

Jack had scarcely left the apartment before a sunny head was intruded.

It was the girl detective.

Roxy never got rattled, but she looked immensely animated just now.

"Hello!" welcomed Bob—"back quick."

"Had to," breathed Roxy, panting a trifle.

"You've been running?"

"Had to do that, too."

"Got anything?"

"I think I have."

"What?"

"The man who passed the fake coin."

"Thought you had him before?"

"I did—as to the block he burrows in."

"And now?"

"His room, his den, if you come quick."

"That's good enough!" cried Bob, hustling the table into order.

"You're with me?"

DIAMOND DICK, JR., IS OFTEN IN DANGER.

"Why not?"

"You acted as if that skeleton hand was the sole magnet in the case!"

"Not at all, Roxy, but one thing at a time, you know. Ready!"

"Wait a minute."

Roxy dropped her handkerchief to the table as if to refold it more conveniently.

As she did so Bob made a discovery.

"Ah!" he commented. "Only one white mouse."

Roxy nodded.

"You took two away with you?"

"I know I did."

"Where's the other?"

"In the pocket of the man we want to hustle and hunt down!" was the girl detective's remarkable statement.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HEAVYWEIGHT DISGUISE.

Bob Ferret gave the incomparable little detective lady a shrewd glance, and hurried on his hat.

"You put the mouse in the man's pocket!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," tranquilly nodded the girl detective.

Roxy very deliberately and carefully nested her remaining pet in her handkerchief.

Then she joined Bob, and both sped down the corridor to the stairway and the street.

"You must indeed have 'got an idea'!" half smiled Bob.

"Oh, I guess it will work! Make fun of me if you like, Bob Ferret, but don't guy my pets!"

"Who's making fun?"

"Watch the results. That's my test!"

Bob "closed up." He had, indeed, little reason for poking fun at the New York flower girl.

Roxy had demonstrated in the past in a marked way her ability to cope with the most adroit criminals.

Latterly, she had impressed some of her wonderful pets into detective service in quite as signal a manner.

What would seem ridiculous in others could be taken quite seriously where Roxy was concerned.

Her trained dog had got to be quite

her second ally in sharp intelligence and boldness.

The monkey she had secured as a trophy from a gang of wire tappers had done some positively remarkable things.

"You see, Roxy, your latest fad, the white mice, are quite a new proposition to me," remarked Bob.

"Being only a boy!" shot back Roxy, "of course you can't understand what patience and care will do to reach these cute little creatures!"

"I know you can do most anything in the training line," confessed Bob. "Don't spar, Roxy—you and I are too good friends for that. What have you accomplished?"

"Well, as I told you, I narrowed that fellow who jumped through the glass store down to a block."

"You told me, Roxy!"

"To-night I ran him to cover in a building."

"Which you are leading me to now?"

"That's it. I saw him come in—I waited. I saw him come out—I bolted."

"Here?"

"No, after him."

"Where did he go?"

"To a pawn shop."

"And got—"

"A bundle of clothing."

"For himself?"

"Yes. It was a hard race. He was as wary and nervous as a chased fox."

"Which didn't faze you any?"

"It gave me some quick dodging and running, I can tell you! I had to drop him at one spot—get back to the shadow of the building, saw him coming, hesitated about, followed him up into it, and—"

"Dropped one of the white mice into his pocket?"

"I did."

"And you expect to trace him through that?"

"Don't I tell you I'm going to do it?" demanded the little lady spiritedly.

"How?"

"You come and see. There's the building."

Roxy crossed to the structure she had described—an ordinary room and office edifice.

Once within the sheltering shadow of its broad street stairway, she motioned Bob to silence and caution.

She hugged the side wall close till she got to the top step.

Bob followed.

Lights from the street only fairly illuminated the bare, uncarpeted diverging halls and corridors.

"Now, then!" she whispered to Bob.

"Yes, Roxy."

"Try and keep your eye on the mouse."

"You're going to let it go?"

"Got to, if I hope to accomplish anything."

"You think it will seek and find its mate?"

"I know it will."

"I hope—"

"Because I've tried this same experiment twenty times before."

"Oh!"

"Get into action!"

"It is action!"

Bob had used a hound half-a-dozen times to help him out on an obscure trail.

That was in the open air, however, with a sizable object to keep in view.

All he had to guide him now, as Roxy set her pet on the floor, was what seemed like a rolling white ball.

A rapid ball, a dodging ball it was, too—that flashing speck flitting about like a butterfly.

Bob lost it in a dive around a corner.

Roxy was with him as he reached it.

"Nowhere!" he whispered forcibly.

"Oh, yes—see?"

The mouse was aloft. It ran the casing of a door in a flash.

Then it put on again, came to a stairway, leaped it step by step, and made a straight shoot, its top reached.

"Nosing pretty closely there!" commented Bob, as, nearly upon the little worker, both he and Roxy paused to watch its maneuvres.

By some delicate sense of scent Roxy's pet seemed actually tracing its missing mate.

It ran ahead, evidently struck a wrong trail, and darted back to the door, above which tilted a transom letting out rays of light.

"That was quick!" uttered Bob.

The mouse had flashed out of sight as if by magic.

"There's your man!" breathed Roxy into her colleague's ear in a tone of thorough conviction.

She pointed beyond the door. Bob listened, but caught no sound—he tried the keyhole, it was stopped up closely.

"Don't dare to venture a lean on the knob and a peer over," he soliloquized. "Still, I'd like a look past that transom. Ah, this way!"

Directly opposite was the door of a dark room.

Bob leaped lightly to its knob, clung to its transom sill, and glanced toward the half closed aperture opposite.

"Hello!" he marveled with a sharp stare.

The girl detective had not "got ideas" in vain!

She knew the ability of her trained pets, had relied upon the same, and here was a practical demonstration of their cleverness.

There, upon the mantel of the room beyond, were Roxy's two white mice—the dumb shadower had found its mate!

Bob dropped lightly and glided to the side of his expectant comrade.

"Well?" murmured Roxy, inquiringly.

"It is well!"

"I fancied it would be."

"We've hit it!"

"It's the room of the man we're after?"

"Both of your white mice are in there."

"And the man himself?"

"Run!"

"Vanish!"

The warnings were a breath, but they sounded none too quickly.

With the rapid aspirations, Bob darted one way, Roxy the other.

The door of a room had opened quickly—a man stuck his head out.

He looked sharply up and down the hall, listened, his face became less suspicious in its expression, and he retired from view again locking the door after him.

The two detective workers came together again, but six steps down the stairs.

"It's the man we chased to-day," affirmed Bob.

DIAMOND DICK, JR. KNOWS HOW TO USE HIS FISTS.

"Yes, I saw his face," nodded Roxy. "Going to nab him?"

Bob reflected.

"I don't know," he murmured, with some hesitation. "It struck me he was preparing to go out."

"Yes, he had a comb in one hand and his hair half parted."

"Then it might be well for one to follow—"

"I'll take that!"

"And the other to remain, get into the room, and see what it shows up."

"Your the burglar of the outfit, Bob!"

"Then, if that's the programme, no need of risking being caught here."

They descended to the street. Bob planned that they would follow the man, when he came out, far enough to see that he would not immediately return—then for a surreptitious visit to his room.

He posted himself in a corresponding doorway across the street.

Roxy wedged her way into an embrasure leading toward an area.

Bob put in some time wondering over the probable fate of Roxy's pets.

He speculated as to what the occupant of the room up stairs thought of the queer arrivals.

He might not have observed the mouse until it got out of his pocket, but he must have noticed the two if he glanced at the mantel.

"Probably he'll think they've strayed in from some other room in the building," calculated Bob.

Something was fired from the darkness of the doorway into the street with a rattle and a roll—a piece of coal.

It put Bob on the alert at once.

"From Roxy—man's coming!" he instantly decided.

Such was the case—down the stairs, out into the street, came the fellow the two young detectives had labored so arduously to run to covert.

The stray gleam of the street light showed his face unmistakably, and Bob knew him in an instant.

Then the same rays falling to the man's figure from his neck down, Bob nearly tumbled off the step he was standing on.

For, whereas that the coin passer at

his last street appearance visible to Bob had been a rather spare, active fellow, he was now a bulky, waddling monstrosity!

He was disguised—Bob discerned this in a flash—but strangely, grotesquely, ridiculously.

A modern Falstaff, bow-windowed to gigantic proportions, from chin to hips he wore an enormous false front.

And Bob Ferret, shrewd Bob Ferret, but startled, puzzled Bob Ferret, wondered why!

CHAPTER V.

A DESPERATE STRAIT..

The man upon whom Bob's eyes were glued paused at the threshold of the big building in a wary manner.

He turned his eyes suspiciously up and down the pavement, across it, back along the stairway, and then seemed satisfied that there were no lurkers about.

"Wonder what he means by that get up!" murmured Bob, studying the strange appearance narrowly.

It was certainly a wonderful one, for it only disguised the man's form—his face, not at all.

That the fellow half concealed by pulling down his big slouch hat so that his features were now in shadow.

For all this, the great contrast between his small head and limbs and his podgy centre, almost made the watching young detective smile.

The coin passer took a slow deliberate step across the sidewalk.

He waddled, rather than walked, shiftily, uneasily, as though his unfamiliar attire bothered him dreadfully.

The girl detective came out of her covert almost instantly.

She had seen at close range what Bob had seen at a distance, and must have arrived at the same conclusion as himself.

There was little danger of the man who had just passed her turning around.

To accomplish that fact he would have been forced to twist his bulky form with the slowness of a safe switched by a derrick.

The man proceeded very slowly to the curb.

Several persons passed by. None of these, however, particularly noticed him.

A DEAD CERTAINTY: DIAMOND DICK, JR. IS A FAVORITE.

"I see how it is—looks normal enough to others," soliloquized Bob; "but to us he seems ponderous, just because we know it's a get up."

The coin passer held a light satchel in one hand. This he gripped, Bob noticed, as if it held something valuable.

He looked anxiously up the street, down the street.

Then he proceeded south, keeping close to the curb, and watching narrowly every vehicle that loomed into view.

Bob got over his stupefaction at the man's changed appearance.

He ventured to cross the street, for his back was turned.

"Roxy!" he uttered with emphatic significance, joining his girl comrade creeping along in the shadow.

"I see."

"Now, whatever has he done it for?"

"That false front?"

"Yes."

"Well, Bob, I guess first, that he thinks he's disguised."

"That is apparent."

"Next, he is—loaded."

"How!"

"If that man hasn't got that false front of his packed with all he possesses, I miss my guess."

"The deuce—it's so!"

"Cheap way of moving—see?"

"He's moving, you think?"

"Don't it look it?"

"Then he mustn't get away."

"Not much danger—with that bulk."

"Yes, but he's watching out for something?"

"I notice that."

"A carriage."

"He acts that way."

"And—there it comes!"

A little distance down the street a vehicle had partly stopped.

The disguised coin passer put his two fingers into his mouth.

A screechy whistle awoke the echoes blaringly.

"He's hailing that driver!" spoke Bob quickly.

"We mustn't let him get on wheels!"

"Make for that satchel he carries, Roxy."

"I'll see to it."

"Now, then!"

"Oh, dear!"

It was rare that Roxy made a misstep.

A piece of banana peel, however, placed just right, caught her feet as she started up.

She fell almost flat, struck out her hands to prevent a tumble, and both palms landed with quite a resounding slap.

The disguised coin passer had halted and stood almost sideways.

He was about to repeat that whistle signal when Roxy's mishap occurred.

The minute he made out a boy and a girl—for Bob had run to Roxy's assistance—it seemed enough to put on the razor edge of suspicion every alarmed sense.

He started down the pavement, running faster than Bob had fancied he possibly could, hampered as he was.

"He's taken the hint!" spoke Bob, quickly.

Roxy had regained her feet, ready to join in the pursuit.

The fugitive was shouting frantically, and Bob saw why.

He had probably ordered a carriage to await him at the curb.

It had not arrived, and he had advanced to meet it.

The vehicle hesitatingly proceeding some distance away was probably the one he had ordered.

That whistle of his had not served to guide its stupid, ill-informed driver to the anxious, watching fare.

The carriage was now turning to look for its load down instead of up the street.

Upon overtaking that vehicle, the waddling runner must have guessed, depended all his fate.

"Stop!" he screamed.

The driver seemed deaf and blind.

"Cabby! cabby!"

The coin passer waved his hand wildly and the satchel with it, but all in vain.

The carriage was proceeding slowly, but he had to go dreadfully slow himself.

If it turned to meet him a junction might result before the twain the coin passer certainly recognized as enemies could overtake him.

"Here! here!" he fairly shrieked.

"Aha!" cried Bob.

"Yes, we're due!" chipped in Roxy.

The carriage had turned—at last.

"This way," bawled the runner.

The cry halted in a kind of a wail, and the coin passer paused with a joggle and a shock.

He saw that ten strides would bring his pursuers upon him as many seconds in advance of the vehicle, even if its driver was making for him.

The fellow faced about desperately.

His eyes were haunted with fright and suspense—his face was pale to the lips.

"He's going to fight," warned Roxy.

"Look out!" cried Bob.

The fellow had drawn a long, murderous-looking knife.

He brandished it at the advancing duo and gnashed his teeth.

"I will kill!" he hissed.

Bob laughed outright.

The laugh drifted into a chuckle, for the driver of that vehicle, while he had turned his horses around, was gawking at the street numbers stupidly as ever.

"Will he never come!" fairly wailed the coin passer.

"I reckon he won't!" sang out Bob.

He advanced straight on his foe, drawing no weapon.

In normal trim Roxy and himself would have been fully able to handle this man.

Now, hampered, he was a mere whirling—his reach could scarcely extend over the formidable wall of air and rubber he wore.

"What do you want?" he quavered, directly at the onspeeding Bob.

"Can't you guess?"

"Don't come near."

"Oh, but I've got to!"

One last hopeless yell the fellow directed at the distant vehicle.

One desperate glance he bestowed on his agile young opponent.

Then he raised the knife.

It went up with a flash, and it came down with a circling swoop.

Roxy's lips pursed to a perfect rosebud of wonder.

Bob's sharp eyes emitted a marveling flash.

Hiss!

Flop!

The coin passer had cut himself open!

He had split himself from stem to stern.

That great air bag that had fronted him went down like a sinking roof.

The Jekyll-Hyde transformation, however, did not end with a mere tame change of identity.

His slit, flapping attire clinging about him like a winding sheet, the coin passer disgorged as well as collapsed.

From out the severed folds of his false front there tumbled a parcel.

"A bag!" read Bob, marveling aloud.

"Of coins," supplemented Roxy.

The bag struck the pavement with a tang.

It split with a sparkle and a jangle.

The secret of the coin passer's "disguise" was patent at last.

The sidewalk was flooded, spangled, rolling with yellow gleaming circles.

"Coinage of 1893!" shouted Bob Ferret, putting promptly for the man with the knife.

CHAPTER VI.

SENT ADRIFT.

"We've tapped the mint!" cried Roxy, irrepressibly.

Bob took time to stare—it was a spectacle worth staring at.

His ready mind found an instantaneous solution of the present bewildering situation.

The coin passer, as the girl detective had hinted, must be "moving."

His narrow graze of the day had frightened him.

He was abandoning his quarters up in the building just left behind.

The idea of a disguise that would serve the double purpose of an express wagon must have occurred to him as a brilliant piece of cleverness.

Utilizing the scheme, inside that balloon-like front he wore he had in some way secured his stock of spurious coin.

Now it lay at his feet—he was worse than discovered, thoroughly hedged in with irrefutable evidences of his guilt.

"Nab him, and close the deal!" shot out Bob, sharply.

The man caught the words. He did

not pause to recover any of his fallen treasures.

Evidently he had counted on their abandonment in conjunction with the collapse of his unwieldy front.

Reduced to usual size now, relieved of the weight of the coin which must have been considerable, he was in trim for normal action.

Bob saw that a forced stand had changed to a sharp break.

"Another race!" he muttered.

The coin passer turned and darted away like a flash.

Evidently the carriage no longer entered into his calculations, for he did not make for it direct.

That vehicle was coming his way, and a dozen leaps would bring him to it.

It was coming Bob's way and Roxy's also, however, the adroit fellow must have seen, and before he could direct a turning the young detective would undoubtedly be upon it.

The sidewalk was clear for half a block ahead, and the runner started without an obstruction in view.

He shifted his head over his shoulder and took a quick look backward.

"Come to time!" called Bob, grimly.

A hissing gasp was all the reply that was vouchsafed.

"Because we've got you this time!"

There was an ugly, defiant snort.

The successive sentences, however—the last sounding much nearer than the first—told the fugitive that he was losing ground.

Now, Bob observed plainly that his anxiety centred on the satchel he carried.

This he suddenly swung from a one-handed dangle to a clutch of both directly in front of him.

"More plunder there!" guessed the young detective.

If this was true, the coin passer was surely unearthing it just as he had the false front.

"Are we to leave all that gold back there?" panted Roxy, keeping up with Bob.

"Brass, you mean—let it slide!"

"It has!"

"Never mind that—the man's the

point now. Sheer off! I'm going to stop him."

Bob's eye lit on a small wooden sign wired lightly to an iron railing in his course.

He gave it a jerk as he passed, swung it free and back, and aimed it at the runner now less than twenty feet in the lead.

It struck and slid faster than the runner could go, but its swishing bang must have warned him.

At all events, he jumped up six inches.

The board just grazed his heels, shied to the curb, and the man ran on.

"Clever!" commented Bob.

"What's he at?" breathed Roxy.

"That satchel seems to trouble him."

"It's locked."

"And he's trying to open it."

"To get something out."

"A revolver, maybe?"

"And can't do it—use yours, or he'll slip us!"

It looked this way. Desperation had given the man new nerve, and he was sprinting pretty well up to adept Bob's own average.

The sharp, constant jerks and dartings of his head toward doorways, every area, showed hopes of discovering some safe avenue to hiding.

"Back!" he suddenly yelled, and wavered. A man had stumbled into the fugitives path—clumsily, unknowingly.

An Italian peddler carrying on one arm a bundle of toy whips, in the other hand a dozen or more colored rubber balloons, stepped out of a doorway.

His head was down with the dejected air of a man homeward bound after a dispiriting day's effort to dispose of his wares.

The waving flash of red, blue and green must have slightly dazed the runner.

With their holder, the balloons about filled the sidewalk space.

"Out of the way!" bellowed the spinning runner.

"Sapristi!"

The peddler gave a jump, but his balloon attachment swept out sideways, light as they were resisting a forcible pull.

"Maledetti!" he screeched.

The man went sprawling with the word.

A collision and then a mixup had been precipitated.

The runner could not stop himself—probably did not try to.

He grazed the peddler and squarely met the long, grouped threads that held the bunch of rubber balloons.

These flopped aside of him and around, and quite stayed and staggered him.

He gripped for the cable of threads and seized it.

Tearing it free from the holder's grasp, he made a spring to jump free of the entire entanglement.

At that moment one foot of the spinning peddler struck his heels.

His toes shot up in the air, and he came down with a teeth-chattering contact.

"Got him now!" voiced Bob, pressing on.

"I guess," nodded Roxy, and ran forward, too.

The man saw them. He directed a baffled, beaten glance at them.

He raised the satchel he carried, and swung it as if desperate enough to hurl it anywhere.

"Wants to get rid of it pretty badly!" traced Bob.

"Wants to get it out of our reach, you mean," corrected Roxy.

"He has!"

The man changed his meditated fling sharply.

He had partially let go of the strings holding the swaying, bobbing balloons.

Now he gripped them for keeps, and a quick aspiration told that he had thought of something.

With almost incredible rapidity, he whipped the trailing bunch of threads around the handle of the satchel.

A dextrous knot was slipped.

Both the wideawake young detectives saw what the man was at at the same moment.

Bob's progress was a slide, Roxy's a spring, but both were too late.

The man gave the satchel an upward fling.

At the same instant he let go of the balloons.

"He shan't beat us!" breathed Roxy, grittily.

She made a leap, but her hand just grazed the bottom of the satchel.

Then, stare-eyed, fluttering, she saw the aerial convoy shot starward.

"A way out!" shouted the man on the sidewalk.

"Tedeschi! pay!" howled the peddler, hitching his way across the pavement.

"You didn't make it!" sneered the coin passer hotly into Bob's face.

Bob's hand was on his arm.

"We've got you, all the same, my man," he spoke, calmly as he could. "Roxy!"

But Roxy was not in sight.

Bob had noticed her eye steadily, eagerly fixed on the floating bunch of airiness with its queer attachment.

He had no idea that she had followed it.

Balloons and Roxy were both out of sight now, however, and Bob was forced to guess that the plucky little novice was on the trail of that mysterious satchel.

His share of the exploit of the hour now centred on the man sitting stubbornly on the sidewalk.

"My pay!" bellowed the peddler.

His fist raised and shaking, the fury-faced balloon vender hovered in front of captive and captor.

"You get away!" ordered Bob, giving the irate Italian a little push.

"You cheat me."

"I'll fix that."

"I fix you!"

"Don't try it!"

Bob was single-handed, but as the man who took him to be in collusion with his despoiler raised his bundle of whips by the handles, Bob caught them by the lashes.

He almost jerked the man off his feet with one big pull, and coolly flung the heap into the gutter.

"Now you be good, my friend!"

"Birr-rr-retti!" choked the fellow.

"I'll pay you—go back the sidewalk—see where the yellow heap is?"

"Aha!" glared the electrified man, catching a glimpse of the scattered richness in the distance.

"Gather it up, watch it till I come.

Be careful!" warned Bob—"it's the government's!"

His captive squirmed at the allusion...

"So are you!" proceeded Bob, nailing the man fast with an iron grip. "Get to your feet!"

"I won't!" sullenly retorted the coin passer.

Bob gave him a jerk that made him howl.

"I can't!"

Bob helped him, to find out.

The fellow seemed hurt. One limb dangled, and the other limped as if his sharp tumble had badly disabled him.

There had been no crowd attracted by what had taken place.

The street held few people, and these at some distance.

Bob glanced at the Italian. He had reached the scattered heap of coins and was staring dumbly.

Bob looked up and ahead. The balloons were a memory so far as nearby appearances went.

Roxy was nowhere in sight.

There was a box standing against an iron-blinded window, upon a glass bull's-eye fretted cellar door.

Bob backed his captive to it.

"Sit down there for a spell," he ordered.

The man sank to the box with a distinct groan.

"Wait a minute, though!"

Bob ran his hands over the man swiftly.

"No weapons," he reported.

"I have!" he added, significantly tapping his hip pocket.

"You've got me!" grumbled the fellow.

"Hark!"

Bob started, bent his ear, let go his arm clutch on his helpless, injured charge.

"Roxy!" he aspirated, eagerly.

Bang! bang! bang! bang! bang! bang! bang!

"Seven!" counted Bob, aloud, and his face grew intense. "It's Roxy firing at the balloons!"

"Eight!" blared the voice of his captive at his side, suddenly, sharply, with ringing triumph.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RED DOG.

"And nine!"

Bob Ferret recoiled with a shock—the movement saved his life.

Tracing the possible source of those distant pistol explosions, he had for a moment got off his guard.

A moment, it seemed, was enough for his specious captive to score a shrewd point.

He must have been waiting for the present opportunity, had feigned helpless injury all along.

Bob felt a light pickpocket touch at his hip, a vigorous jerk, those flaring, vindictive numerals, a hot, searing contact—all at once, it seemed.

The coin passer had snatched at Bob's revolver, got possession of it, and had fired promptly, and point blank at the young detective.

Bob's head took a spin, for he was nearly deafened.

That sharp, alert, involuntary dodge had saved him the upper half of that useful, needful, busy head of his.

As it was, the powder singed and flecked one cheek till it stung as if burned by a red hot plate.

"Ten!"

Bob retreated—it was the only way, under present rapid and distracting conditions.

A ceaseless fusilade right at hand had taken up Roxy's dropped firing.

Just as she had been bombarding the balloons, the coin passer was now trying to pepper Bob.

A bullet ploughed a furrow along Bob's shoe.

Another perforated his cap peak, and Bob dropped over into a pair of cellar steps to shelter, just here.

He saw dismayedly his late captive, agile though now, leap to the box.

With a nimble spring he caught at the lowermost rung of a fire escape ladder running up the building.

"It won't do!" voiced Bob, in desperation, and came to the surface boldly.

"Have another!" crowded down the ascending flash.

The hammer fell with no explosion following.

DIAMOND DICK, JR. GOES ON THE TRAIL.

Bob jogged his memory to recall the cartridge armament of the weapon.

"Three chambers empty," he calculated, rapidly. "Now, my man!"

Bob sprang boldly upon the box, nimbly to the iron ladder.

"Take it!" bolted the man, twenty feet up.

"Whew!" winced Bob.

The man had thrown the useless weapon with all his might.

It struck Bob's hand right where the knuckles rounded to the bar grasp, nearly paralyzing it.

Bob dropped, but was up again in an instant, poising to regain lost ground.

"Hold on, there!"

"Don't interfere!" shouted Bob to a policeman running up excitedly, attracted by the shots.

"Who's firing?"

"That man."

"What man?"

"Up there."

"Up where?"

"Burr!" shivered Bob.

"Ugh!" winced the policeman.

A crash overhead answered the question, but a shower, brittle and penetrating, prevented an investigating look.

The coin taker had vanished. He had kicked in a window, and bolted through the aperture thus audaciously made.

"Who is he?" gasped the policeman.

"A crook."

"What kind of a crook?"

"Up that doorway! I'll take the fire escape. Ask questions after you've caught him."

"Well! Boy!" snorted the affronted officer.

"Oh, you're no good!"

The lumbering nonentity actually made a sweep at Bob with his club.

Bob's heels dangled in his face in a flash.

A lively ascent, a dive through the broken window, a run through a labyrinth of halls and corridors, and Bob came down to the street with a pretty rueful face.

The policeman was waiting for him. He made a pounce as Bob reached the street.

"Hands off!" ordered Bob, none too good-naturedly, backing.

"See here! my lark——"

"Well, you old owl?"

Bob was mettled.

"Now, then, who are you, creating all this disturbance?"

"Mind your own business!" snapped Bob, testily.

"You daring young bobolink——"

"Tending crossings—you don't seem to know how to catch a thief."

"Why, I'll lock you up!"

"Try it!" dared Bob. "You might have caught that man. Leave me alone."

Bob staggered the perverse fellow, bulky as he was, by grasping his extended arm in a grip that pained him.

With the other hand he flashed a badge right into the man's eyes.

"Ah! ah—why, you're one of us!" floundered the policeman, goggling at a secret service badge with which the treasury agent had supplied the young detective.

"Likely!"

Bob swept on in superb disdain.

He scurried to where the balloon peddler stood like a statue.

He had found an old battered tin pail —into it he had piled the scattered coins.

At them he stood staring, vaguely, blankly, like a person in a dream.

Bob scanned keenly for any missing, but the fellow seemed to have done his work well.

"How much for those balloons?" he queried, hastily.

"Sixteen."

"Well?"

"Ten apieca."

"There's double, but look here, my man, if you've helped yourself to any of that coin——"

"Nevera! nevera!" protested the Italian.

"They're counterfeit."

"Aha!—sticka to my fingers. Sapristi! I wanna not!"

The Italian swooped a dozen coins from his pocket.

They jangled instantaneously into the pail with affrighted vehemence of direction, and the fellow shot away.

Bob spread a handkerchief over the

pail top, and started in the direction the balloons and Roxy had gone.

"A bad miss, that fellow getting away!" he ruminated.

Bob felt pretty sore. He was changing his mind about the coin taker.

The latter might be a secondary character in the treasury plot, but he was certainly an important adjunct of his class.

His handlings of coin were no pinch-penny transactions—the satchel, judging from his anxiety for its safety, contained something out of the ordinary.

Bob paused at the first intersecting street and looked down it.

Then he glanced up, and his eyesight focused at the roof apex of a building half way down the square.

Some people opposite were staring up there in a wondering, puzzled way.

Bob, advancing a few paces, saw what they saw.

"The balloons," he soliloquized, and stared more sharply.

They seemed caught in a jagged piece of cornice.

Half of them were shattered and shriveled—the few remaining did not seem to possess sufficient strength or buoyancy to lift readily.

"The satchel? No—" began Bob.

"The satchel, yes!" corrected a voice at his side.

"Hello, Roxy!"

"Hello, Bob!"

The girl detective had flitted from between two houses just where her colleague stood.

She looked flustered, excited, pretty well done out.

"Good thing I can run!" she spoke, reflectively.

Bob glanced at her mud-spattered boots.

"And shoot," she insinuated, softly, further. "And climb!"

Her torn attire told that she had been climbing, and by no smooth course, either.

"But you got it?" hailed Bob, eagerly.

His eyes were fast riveted on the satchel in Roxy's hand.

"I got it," nodded Roxy.

"Let's see!"

"Oh, I've seen!"

"Have you?"

Roxy handed the satchel to Bob.

He noted that its lock had been forced, but the handles were tied close together by a handkerchief he at once identified as belonging to Roxy.

"What?" he queried, quite eagerly, and shook the satchel.

"It won't shake, Bob."

"Eh? ah! say!"

Bob's face wrinkled to a queer expression.

Something moved in the satchel—something made a low noise, half whimper, half whine.

"Well!" cried Bob, "an animal!"

Roxy nodded.

"Tell me!" pressed Bob, devoured with curiosity.

"It will tell its own story."

"Show me!"

"In a minute. Bob, that man you've caught—"

"The coin passer?"

"Yes."

Bob's glance fell.

"I haven't caught him, Roxy."

"What! he got away?"

Bob narrated how.

"Thought you thought he was small fry?"

"I've half changed my opinion."

"I guess so—not such small fry after all, for he's given us a big pointer!"

"The satchel?"

"A great big pointer!"

"Come, come, Roxy! you're torturing me!" cried Bob, impatiently—"what's in the satchel?"

"A dog."

"Ah!"

"An animal, Bob," proclaimed Roxy, impressively, "that is the next best thing to the owner of that skeleton hand."

Bob looked expectant and excited.

"The fellow who robbed the United States Treasury."

"You don't say so!"

"That satchel contains—"

"Speak it out!"

"Duffield Watson's famous red dog!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FOUND AND LOST.

Face, eyes, voice—Bob Ferret flashed out an unmistakable sentiment of approbation and surprise.

"Got Duffield Watson's famous red dog!" he cried.

"Things fit that way," nodded Roxy.

"The animal that helped that renowned bank sneak nearly get the imperial jewels at the Paris exposition?"

"If it's the same."

"Then we've as good as got—"

"The owner of the skeleton hand—the great treasury thief."

"Yes, Duffield Watson himself!"

Bob Ferret thrilled as he took a closer grip on the satchel.

His eyes bestowed on Roxy—delightful, energetic Roxy—a rare commanding glance.

"Great as a girl—royal as a chum!" enthused Bob. "Roxy, you've brought in the clue of all clues! I'm staggered. Let me think."

In sixty seconds quick Bob Ferret had conjecture and positive facts righted, dovetailed, in order.

"The coin taker must be Watson's right-hand man?" suggested Roxy.

"If this is the dog we think, yes."

"Suppose you find out?"

Bob scanned the buildings nearby. He singled out a candy store and made for it.

It had an ice cream parlor at the rear.

This they had to themselves, and the satchel on the table between them, two minutes later.

"Now then!" said Roxy.

"Yes, now, then!" echoed Bob, untying the handkerchief.

He opened the handles cautiously.

An elfish, shrewd-eyed little head poked out.

It was that of a slim, nervous dog, weighing not more than six pounds, blue blood speaking in every delicate curve of the sensitive mouth and nostrils.

Its neck had a scruff of bright red hair.

"I accept it!" said Bob, definitely.

"As Duffield Watson's dog?"

"Yes. Haven't we got to? Don't it seem plausible? Why else, unless it is

true, and this little animal is a valuable, an important ally in Watson's schemes, as it always has been, would the coin taker be so anxious to keep out of our clutches?"

"Sound logic, Bob!"

"Isn't it?"

"Don't I say it is!"

Bob mistrusted the quick-blinking, crafty eyes of the dog, and would not let it out farther than the neck.

"Seems to have a blanket on?" he remarked, feeling.

"Yes, hair shaved clear from the neck back, clipped close, I fancy," nodded Roxy. "Now, what?"

Bob became thoughtful.

"We've certainly got a great clue," he murmured.

"If we can use it."

"Oh! it's got to bring us up against its master!"

"Then why don't you start in?"

"You suggest?"

"The way we've tried a dozen times—turn the dog loose."

"And lose him?"

"No, turn him loose and don't lose him."

"Go ahead."

"Start from the building where we traced the coin taker."

"Well?"

"And follow, that's all. He'll lead us home. If he's half as smart as his training ought to make him, that's a foregone fact."

"All right."

Roxy left Bob and proceeded to the nearest hardware store.

She came back with a fine strong steel chain and collar.

"Now let him out, if you want to," she directed, a minute later.

The first thing the little animal did was to bolt for the door.

"No, you don't—not too fast!" demurred Roxy, holding to the other end of the chain. "Come, Bob. Oh, catch him!"

The dog had got loose.

Bob sprang to his feet and made a dive. He had affixed the collar, Roxy the chain, and not knowing as much about dogs as the latter, Bob had com-

mitted a serious blunder, for he had given the animal's throat too much play.

Defeated in jerking loose, the shrewd little midget simply lay flat, turned over, thrust both paws up to its neck, pushed off the collar and was free.

It sped for the front of the candy store like a flash.

Bob followed so precipitately that he swept one of the swinging baize doors clear off its hinges.

"Got him!" he exulted.

"No, you haven't!"

"The dickens!" Bob had thrown himself headlong just as the dog reached the open street threshold.

His hand gripped the blanket covering the little red wonder.

Keeling over instantly, the animal did for its jacket what it had done for the collar—slipped deftly out of it.

Bob glared at the trophy left in his grasp—then out at the street.

"Say!" he fairly shouted.

The dog flashed south, met a pedestrian, turned like a sprite, and put the other way.

"Say!" echoed Roxy, quite as startled.

"Gone!"

"Oh, for good!"

The canine had flashed somewhere, anywhere, nowhere, by the time Bob got up and Roxy to the street.

Both, however, had seen a remarkable thing.

"Do you understand?" questioned Bob, all a-flutter.

"I think I do!"

"Messenger dog?"

"Slick as they have them!"

"Shaved close, and chalked, painted, marked in some way on its side. I read the line distinctly! 'The sleuths are on!'"

"Oh, no!" dissented Roxy, quickly.

"Oh, yes!"

"I didn't see that."

"What, then?"

"A street and a number."

Bob stared dubiously at Roxy.

"Sure?"

"Dead positive!"

"Then it was marked on both sides!"

"And we each noted only one."

"Well!"

Roxy was repeating the number and street in question as Bob stood lost in profound speculation.

Beyond doubt the famous red dog was living up to its record.

It was Duffield Watson's accredited messenger—his instructions were sent to his allies marked on its smooth, sleek, shaven sides.

The blanket hid the same till its destination was reached.

Presumably Watson had sent word to the coin taker, and the coin taker was hustling to meet him with the dog when pounced on by Bob and Roxy.

"Don't delay, Bob!" directed the latter, keenly.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to investigate that message—it's on the next street."

"And the number?"

"Eleven-ninety-three."

It was too good a pointer to be disregarded, but when they reached the place in question Bob looked disappointed.

"Millinery store," he spoke, reading a sign above a plain brick house.

"Has been. Don't think it is now. Light in there."

"Let's get closer."

The front door of the building was open. Beyond its first interior door light showed.

Roxy pressed Bob's arm as they stood trying to trace some movement in the room beyond.

Then the girl detective ran her hand lightly over the door before them.

She drew back a trifle at the echo of a sniffing, swishing sound.

"It's the place," she whispered to Bob.

"How do you know?"

"I hear the dog in there."

"Better make ourselves scarce, then, before he barks," suggested Bob.

"Wait."

"Are you inviting detection, Roxy?"

"I guess not!"

Roxy had made a discovery, and proceeded to utilize it.

The panel of the door below the knob was of glass.

"Looking glass!" she soliloquized, audibly; "one of those tawdry signs you often see."

"Be careful!" warned Bob, as he saw what his quick-witted colleague was up to.

Roxy had taken out a hat pin.

This she ran under the crack of the door.

Then she almost noiselessly tapped long the edge of the glass panel.

There was a slight whimper. Roy kept the hat pin moving.

Scratch! scratch!

"Well! she's made it!"

Paws began to make various dabs and scratches in the reverse quicksilver surface of the panel sign.

"Ready!" directed Roxy, as a piece the size of a quarter was scratched away by the mystified animal on the other side of the door.

"Look!" she breathed.

Both pressed close in range of the voided space on the quicksilvered back of the sign.

It was a rare sight for Bob Ferret.

He felt as he gazed that he had arrived at one of those moments when the climax of an important case hovered.

A whistle sounded inside the room and the dog scurried pattering across its floor.

Bob saw it leap to a table before which sat a man.

His back was to the young detective, but Bob's eye, roaming over him sharply, noted some material points.

He was light complexioned, he was between thirty and forty years of age, he answered in description to the original of the picture marked "Duffield Watson" in Aleck's album of "noted criminals."

"False beard, false wig, but I'll take him on trust!" spoke Bob.

"Wait!" directed Roxy.

Bob's hand was on the knob. The man was alone in the apartment beyond. If it was Duffield Watson, he could not be corraled too speedily—before some obstruction to his arrest presented.

Bob, however, consented to wait a moment or two.

He was rewarded by an exhibition of some pretty shrewd work in the way of animal culture.

Placing the dog on the table, its ap-

parent master drew a crayon from his pocket.

He marked on one side of the animal—the side away from Bob.

He drew from his coat a new blanket and affixed it.

Then he ran over several photographs which he took from his pocket.

One he held steadily before the dog, and fixedly the intelligent little animal regarded it.

"Wonderful—he's taught the dog to know a face from a picture!" murmured Bob.

"Wish I had that little prodigy!" breathed Roxy, ardently.

"You shall—and now is the time to get it. Watch out!"

Bob brushed Roxy aside—he estimated the strength of the door.

Stepping back four feet, he covered it with a quick forcible forward leap.

The door gave in.

"If it's got to be, you know best—I'm with you!" murmured Roxy, doughtily.

Bob ran right upon the amazed and startled man at the table.

Before he could move or speak, the young detective was upon him.

He bore him back, holding his hands out, tipping him, chair and all, to the floor.

"What's this?" flared the man.

"Roxy!"

"Here!"

"Handcuffs!"

Click! clank! snap!

"Got him!"

"The dog?"

"It's making off!"

"Mustn't!"

The little animal set up a dubious whimper, puzzled at the commotion.

Then it bolted through the doorway, Bob and Roxy after it.

At the street they paused and turned back, observing the folly of attempting to follow or overtake the flying flash streaking it down the street like mad.

"Got the man, anyway!" jubilated Bob.

"Yes, manacled one hand to the radiator pipe."

"Then he hasn't budged."

"But he has!" cried Roxy.

She halted in dire dismay at the door of the room they had just left.

An opposite window, not open before, was open now.

The spot where their captive had been left pinioned was vacant.

Duffield Watson—if their recent important capture was indeed he—was gone.

Bob set up a terrific shout of chagrin.

"Thought you handcuffed him close?" he began.

"To the radiator."

"One wrist?"

"I thought—"

"You've missed! Look!"

Look, indeed!

They had found and lost what they had sought for—Duffield Watson.

The evidence of this fact lay before their eyes.

To the radiator pipe still clinched one of the handcuffs.

It held a hand at the wrist, but only a hand.

Roxy had handcuffed the treasury thief at the wrist of his severed member.

Duffield Watson had substituted and wore for the lost skeleton hand a wood and pasteboard semblance of its original.

And this false hand was all that the adroit treasury thief had left behind him!

CHAPTER IX.

THE DECOY.

"Blocked, eh?" questioned Jack Burton.

"Stumped, I should say!" commented Buff Hutchinson.

"Oh, not quite as bad as that, I hope!" responded Bob Ferret.

"I'm not going to be, for one!" asserted Roxy, doughtily.

The girl detective left the sitting-room of the suite occupied by Nick Carter's detective pupils in high dudgeon.

Bob looked worried and troubled.

"For a fine beginning, we seem to have scored a dismal ending," he confessed to his colleagues.

With the escape of the man who for a second time had left a hand behind him as a sentient reminder of his identity—the notorious Duffield Watson, beyond a doubt—Bob Ferret's first great case in

Washington seemed to have come to a disastrous halt.

Every member of the coterie started out on an active scout immediately succeeding, but results had been nothing.

The place where the last act in the drama had occurred and the former room of the coin passer had at once been put under close surveillance, but the covey had taken the alarm and refused to revisit their former haunts.

The treasury agent accredited Bob with considerable cleverness for this practical ousting of the gang, but this did not suit the ardent, thorough young detective.

It was not enough to capture a hundred-weight of spurious coin, to learn the identity of the controlling spirit in the combination, to scatter his cohorts.

Bob felt that he could only consider duty done when Duffield Watson, the chief schemer, was safe behind prison bars and the stolen government property recaptured.

Since the last escape of the little red dog the passing of the false coin seemed to have come to a stop.

More than that, hide and hair, master and man, Watson, the coin passer, their accomplices farther down the line, had disappeared as completely as if they had moved to another sphere.

Bob put out an active tracer on the dog, all hands helping.

A red dog of the description sought for was something of a rarity, but Duffield Watson's clever dumb ally put in no further appearance.

Bob left his friends immediately after a vague, unsatisfactory consultation at their quarters at the hotel.

"Where are you going, Bob?" inquired Roxy, ready dressed for the street, meeting him in the hall.

"Only for a walk."

"So am I."

"Come along, then, and we'll—think."

"We've exhausted that feature," observed the little lady. "It's watching that will help us, if anything. We know from Mr. Carter's telegram that Duffield Watson was in Washington."

"Didn't we have our hands right on him?"

"And my blundering let him go!"

"Pure accident, that."

"Well, I feel it my duty to get him again, and if he's here—Bob, he is here!"

They had been passing a quiet residence block as they strolled on.

Trees shaded the curb, and half to the shadow of one of these Bob's companion drew him so sharply that he knew intuitively that something was up.

"Look yonder!" directed Roxy, pointing, her eyes aflash.

"The dog—Watson's red dog!" exclaimed Bob, almost unable to believe the evidence of vision.

"Don't get rattled, Bob, and he's yours."

"Is he!"

"Go ahead, but cautiously."

"It's the gladdest sight for two whole days!" breathed Bob, ardently, gliding down the street.

The red dog was beyond him. It had just come into view. There could be no possible mistake as to the canine's identity.

Roxy imagined it had come out of an alley. Bob didn't see, and cared less.

Bob started with a rush, but immediately let down on his pace.

Two men, lounging at the end of the alley, and apparently hostlers at some one of its numerous stables, seemed to stare at his urgency and excitement, and Bob made it a professional point never to attract attention if it was possible to avoid it.

Besides this, the dog was in bad shape.

"No danger of his getting away this time!" gloated Bob.

The red dog was limping, and proceeded very slowly. Bob was able to keep up with it on a walk.

His first impulse was to overtake it, gather it up.

His next was to shadow it, see where it was bound for, and this he did.

He glanced back as he turned the next corner in close pursuit of his dumb guide.

"Hello!" he commented, "that's queer!"

What seemed queer to Bob was that Roxy had not accompanied or followed him.

So engrossed had he been in his task that he had not noted this till now.

Now, to his surprise, he saw Roxy's back only—she was headed directly away from him.

"Thinks I can take care of this incident alone?" speculated Bob. "All right!"

If Bob could have seen the girl detective's face at that moment, however, he would have been startled and puzzled.

Roxy was walking fast, and her eyes were snapping with animated thought.

"Planted!" she uttered, turning the next corner.

"I must stop him!" she added, breaking instantly into a run.

She was safe to pursue this course now, for she was out of the street where the dog had come into view.

More than that, she was out of sight of the two "hostlers" Bob had casually noticed at the mouth of the alley.

They were not hostlers—they were allies of Duffield Watson, the treasury thief, as Roxy had found out to a certainty.

"Waiting for him!" fluttered Roxy, speeding along the pavement. "They had the dog in that bag I saw one of them pocket. I noticed their looks, and played the careless so they'd think I don't suspect. Bob is being led into a trap!"

Roxy's worst fears were confirmed the more she reflected over little details she had noticed in the actions of the two men under suspicion.

Her plan was to round the square and intercept Bob, and it was an anxious spurt of speed.

It ended in the third turning with a quick halt and a blank stare.

Roxy was startled, for neither Bob nor the dog came into sight.

She had seen them turning into this square—they could not possibly have passed the corner where she now stood, they proceeding at a leisurely, she at a flying rate of speed.

"I see!" exclaimed Roxy, suddenly.

A street cut in, mid-square.

Roxy reached it.

Down its length, some five hundred feet or more the dog was turning Bob was turning.

Roxy fairly skimmed the paving stones. Breathless she reached the intersecting avenue—a mere stable court.

"Bob!" she shouted.

Too late.

Bob had gone into the trap set for him—Bob had plunged into danger headlong.

Roxy saw a high, fence, with a hole at its base to let out and admit chickens.

She saw Bob's heels disappear through this and that was her last sight of him.

"He's followed the dog in there. In where?" fluttered the girl detective, running on breathlessly. "To his death, maybe!"

The desperate character, the sanguinary past record of Duffield Watson, stood out tragically menacing in Roxy's mind in that speeding minute of thought.

"Bob's gone in there—who's afraid to follow?" she breathed, stanchly.

She ran right on and up to the fence, noticing critically a looming shuttered building in front.

"Got to get in, though, so!" began the girl detective.

And ended with a crouch and a spring.

Then Roxy caught the top board of the fence, skimmed it, and in one agile leap landed in the yard beyond, deftly, lightly, as only Roxy could.

CHAPTER X.

TRAPPED!

Snap! Crack!

"What have I struck?"

Bob Ferret had shadowed the decoy red dog foot by foot.

When it went through the hole in the fence he followed.

As it poised on the edge of a dark cellar window space in the building in front and sprang, Bob still pursued.

Fear of discovery, the fancied echo of near voices, hurried him—then his undoing, instanter.

The dog had leaped to some purpose—it knew the pitfalls.

Bob, dropping through gloom and uncertainty, struck some wooden framework that shot up around him like a hinged crate exactly fitted to hold a human being helpless.

"A trap!" he instantly guessed, and

pinioned stationary, fell flat with a clatter.

"Aha!" pronounced a sinister voice in the darkness.

Footsteps moved about, a broad door was rolled back, light flooded the place.

Bob took a look at the speaker.

"In it!" he decided, with emphasis. "It's Duffield Watson!"

The pivot of the great counterfeiting swindle stood surveying his prostrate captive with undisguised satisfaction.

"I've been waiting for you!" he stated simply, but there was a significant ring to the tones that might have daunted a stouter heart than Bob's.

"Well, I've come, it seems," answered Bob, promptly and coolly.

"As I have intended. Short stories, youngster! I know you, you know me. You've done what the government couldn't."

"Thanks!"

"Don't congratulate yourself!"

"Why not?"

"That's why!"

The man stooped over. It was to grasp the end of the slatted wooden trap.

Dragging it up to some kind of a ponderous machine, he lifted it.

Bob thrilled a trifle as he was slid over a smooth, polished metal plate.

Then he shivered, for he knew where he was—he looked squarely up into the die standard of a ponderous stamping machine.

"Do you understand now?" demanded Watson.

"I can guess," answered Bob, in quite a subdued tone.

"You traced me through a certain skeleton hand?"

"I'll admit it, if it helps matters any," vouchsafed Bob.

"Where is the ring you found upon one of its fingers?"

"In New York city, in Mr. Nick Carter's possession."

"Ah! That's bad for you."

"Is it?"

"Decidedly. In other words, young fellow, I see that you have gone too far to be let out. You're the one who started the hunt, the first to strike the real trail. You know me by sight. It makes it un-

safe for me anywhere. Guess you'll have to get it first."

"What?"

"That!"

The man proceeded up to the machine. There was thorough cruelty and wickedness of purpose only in his face now.

He put his hand upon a big iron bar.

Bob knew what it was—the operating lever of the machine.

An immense weight, pushed past the centre, usually operated such.

Bob did not cry out, but his flesh crept.

Watson put out his foot to touch the pressure pedal.

"It don't work!" he muttered.

Bob discovered that something was wrong.

"Confusion! the weight is gone. How's this? It was there a minute ago!"

Bob could not trace this apparent mystery. As to Watson, he glared about with a darkening, suspicious brow.

He ran to the front part of the cellar and looked past an open door.

No one seemed to be in view.

"Is this a give-away, just as I'm making off?" Bob heard him mutter.

As he started to inspect what looked like a kitchen, he passed a square tin box.

It rested on a low partition. Splat!

Bob, by straining his glance, could now follow the man's movements.

They changed from a run and looks of suspicious inquiry to a blank, staggering halt.

Bob saw what Watson probably did not see—the hand that had pushed an object into the tin tank, full of some chemical employed in finishing the spurious coins undoubtedly manufactured here from the stolen treasury die.

"Roxy?" breathed Bob, hopefully—"yes, Roxy!" he murmured, convincedly.

The spattering liquid had struck Watson's face—his eyes, as well.

"Slope, Bob!"

Never were words more welcome—never, it seemed, did such exultant relief inspire Bob as now.

A form glided from behind the partition and snapped some catch in the wooden trap that freed his helpless limbs.

"My eyes! What fell?" gasped Watson, reeling blindly. "A towel! My handkerchief!"

He groped in his pocket for the latter. A parcel on top was in the way.

He pulled this out, placed it on the partition top, and urgently drew out and applied his handkerchief to his burning eyes.

"That!" fluttered Roxy, spinning forward again.

Bob, cramped, hampered by the loose framework, bent his energies to get totally free and to the floor.

He saw Roxy dart for the package, grasp it and glide toward the rear of the house.

At that moment Watson got his eyes free of the blinding acid—saw the flitting form—put after it.

Roxy had got into the house unperceived, had heard and seen considerable, had disabled the stamping press.

"Give that up," stormed Watson, "you vixen! I guess who you are! Give that up!"

"It's what I guess!" breathed Roxy.

Into the kitchen Watson ran—a broom-stick blow drove him back.

Panting, at bay, defiant, armed with the only weapon in reach, Roxy stood half way between a gasoline stove and a flour board.

The package had disappeared.

"Where is it?" flared Watson.

"Lost in the shuffle!"

Whack! whack!

The man grabbed for a stove handle.

Rattle—puff—bang!

A careless knock must have disturbed the gasoline apparatus, or Roxy saw a point and made it.

At all events, Bob, just getting into action and hastening to the connecting door of the two rooms, was driven back by a sheet of flame.

He heard Roxy cry out, "Take care of yourself!" Watson mutter in dismay and alarm.

Bob made a second essay to cross the barrier now blazing away like a volcano.

He gave it up finally, and sought some other outlet of escape.

There was an open window at one side of the apartment he was in.

Bob, reaching it, climbed through.

A wagon stood directly in his way—a vehicle piled high with potatoes.

Some peddler's rig, Bob fancied it to be.

"I don't know my bearings—out of this a bit to watch who tries to leave by the street," he soliloquized.

Bob climbed up to the seat of the wagon.

"Get up!" he urged, seizing the lines.

"Sit still!" pronounced a grim, menacing voice.

One hand seemed to reach from under the seat and grabbed one of Bob's ankles in a grip like iron.

Up over the back from the vacant space beneath came the other hand of the same person.

An unmistakable hard, round muzzle or nozzle pressed into Bob's back.

"Move, and you're dead!" sounded an ominous threat.

"It's—Watson!" breathed Bob.

The fellow must have got out of the house, lifted the wagon seat, shot into hiding under it.

"Drive on!" came the stern, threatening order, fateful as the voice of doom.

CHAPTER XI.

"BRING ON YOUR NEXT CASE."

Bob Ferret felt himself to be in a decidedly ticklish position.

The treasury thief was driven to the last ditch, and therefore was desperate and determined.

Bob could hear yells of "Fire!" "fire!" a commotion in which several voices and running feet mingled, but he could not see any one.

The sides of two buildings hemmed in a narrow roadway leading not to the street, but to a rear court.

Bob felt the clutch on his ankle tighten, the close embrace of Watson's iron hook answering for a hand.

At the same time the revolver muzzle clamped closer into the small of his back.

"Drive on!" came gruff but incisively from the man out of view.

"Where?"

Bob saw his play, and forced it. He chattered the word, he got up quite

an artistic tremor, to convey an impression that he was dreadfully frightened.

"Straight ahead."

"I will!"

"Remember! I will kill you if you play any tricks!"

"Please don't!"

"I will spare you if you obey me."

"Yes, sir!"

The hidden man fancied he had scared his pilot into abject subjugation.

Bob proceeded reflectively. He wondered what had become of Roxy.

He speculated, further, concerning the package she had secured and got away with, and which Watson seemed to esteem so highly.

As they neared the end of the court a queer thing happened.

An urchin came running toward them, chased by another.

As he passed the wagon he veered toward it and grabbed one of the potatoes.

"Let up, or I'll plug you!" he bawled to his pursuer.

"Yah! you can't peg straight!"

"Can't I!"

The boy poised the potato.

The other dodged, but there was no need.

Flying shy of its intended mark, the potato struck a lamp post.

It smashed to fragments, but as it did so something glittered from its centre a spinnig disc of bright yellow.

Bob's eyes distended wide.

"Hello!" he muttered simply "a coin!"

Were each of those potatoes "stuffed," and under the guise of garden truck was Watson calculating on getting his spurious hoard to some new hiding?

"Go on!" ordered his captor, as Bob wavered, reaching the public street.

"Which way?"

"Straight ahead, of course is there any other way?"

Bob did as directed.

"In two squares you turn into an alley," came the ominous voice behind him.

"Do I?"

"You do. Stop when I say—not before."

Bob cast about for some means of getting out of the present predicament.

It was a hard one—the man's hook clutch never loosened, and the revolver was held firm, steady, unwaveringly.

If he leaped a shot would certainly follow, and he would be sure to topple if Watson maintained his clutch on his ankle.

Still Bob was determined that he would never convey this masterful fellow to safe shelter.

The described alley ahead he would never penetrate!

How to evade it was the question. The horse went slow, but there must be an end to all things.

Bob's ears pricked up suddenly. Was that the detective school whistle signal?

He slightly turned. His sidelong glance showed Roxy coming down the street on a run.

Bob freed one hand from the reins.

In active deaf and dumb telegraphing he tried to inform his approaching colleague of the fix he was in.

He saw Roxy run up behind the wagon, he tried to devise some plan of utilizing her to defeat Watson's purpose.

One square had now been covered. In two minutes more Bob would have to turn into the alley.

An idea suddenly struck him. Bob turned into the street car tracks.

There was a difficult split switch rail ahead.

He had his plan, but wondered if it would succeed.

Back went his hand again to the watchful "hitch behind," indicating his purpose.

Bob hoped to snap off a wheel, to get stuck, to overturn, if possible, when he reached the switch.

"Get out of the tracks!" sounded sharply and suddenly.

"All right," mumbled Bob.

He made a feint of obeying, but managed to keep in the tracks till the split rail just caught the front wheel.

Bob gave one line a quick jerk, and the horse turned one whole point of the compass.

"Whoa!"

"What you done?"

Creak—grind! Crash!

"Let go!"

"Drat you!"
"I'll be killed!"
"I'll—"

Bob leaped—Watson had let go, because he was avalanched, crushed, buried.

Roxy had pulled at the tail board, then she had swung the whole rear end of the vehicle.

She had "helped," and the whole load tipped, and the front wheel snapped short at the axle.

There was a movement in the mass of overturned potatoes—a form half burrowed up.

"Grab!" uttered Bob, sharply.

A revolver was brandished wildly, but before the half-stunned Watson could direct it, Roxy, slipping behind, held both hands over his eyes. Bob caught both wrists.

One was a mere iron hook, but Bob managed so it was held helpless by the stout steel links of the handcuffs.

He dragged the foaming, fuming treasury thief out of the mingled mass.

"Cab—express wagon!" he spoke, shortly, to Roxy.

Roxy sped for both—returned with Jack and Buff, whom she had caught up at the hotel, which was only three squares distant.

Bob briefly explained the situation.

Buff undertook to see the potatoes loaded into the express wagon, experiment having verified Bob's suspicions that each masked from one to half a dozen of the spurious coins.

"He'll not get away from me!" pronounced Jack, grandly.

"I'm ready, Roxy," reported Bob at last.

The girl detective had informed Bob some time back that a speedy visit was necessary to the scene of the gasoline stove explosion.

"Don't want to pester you, Bob," she declared, "but there's something we want to get there."

"I'm with you, Roxy!"

Roxy explained how she had got into the kitchen of the place, after observing its mistress—an old colored woman—gossiping in the next yard, and presumably settled there for some time.

"I locked a man in stout, tight coal shed as I came away," she narrated.

"Indeed?"

"A man and a dog—man we've seen before."

"Not the coin taker?"

"It was, and a red dog."

"There seems to be no fire?" commented Bob, as they ran down the court leading to the rear of the recent haunt of the treasury thief.

"All put out," reported Roxy, darting through a gate in the fence, now open.

There was quite a crowd in the yard—firemen and others.

Roxy ran up to a shed, examined its padlock, and nodded to Bob.

"In there?" he questioned.

"Yes," assented Roxy.

"Got the key?"

"Here it is."

Bob beckoned to a policeman in the crowd.

He told plainly who he was, and opened the door.

The coin passer made a dart for liberty as the portal came open.

The officer interfered, and Bob forced the red dog back as it strove to follow.

He had just seen the officer start with his prisoner for the same station where he had directed Jack to lodge Watson, when Roxy rejoined him.

She had a bulky package in her hands—something done up in a towel and then in a newspaper.

Both were grimy, and Roxy's shapely hands themselves were somewhat sooted.

"Not much of a blaze," she said, "but a grand scorch of everything in that kitchen."

"Oh! you were in there, eh?" queried Bob.

"Yes."

"Got what you wanted?"

"I have."

"That is it?" persisted Bob, indicating the bundle the girl detective bore.

"That is it."

"And—what?"

"We'll see when we get where I can open it. You bring along the dog—he's mine now!"

Bob knew that Roxy had a climax on the tapis, and humored her.

They proceeded at once to the police station, where Jack had preceded them.

A word from Bob to the officer in charge gave them the liberty of the captain's own private office.

There Bob and Roxy held quite a reception during the next hour.

First, Jack came to report the king-bee of the combination, Duffield Watson, in safe limbo down stairs.

The officers appeared next with a similar report regarding the coin passer.

In answer to a telephone message to the hotel, Aleck and Larry came hastening to receive orders for a scout through the half-burned building for traces of other accomplices of Watson, or more of the counterfeiting paraphernalia.

Buff entered as the twain left.

"Load of potatoes safely stored, Bob!" he announced.

"Awaiting the treasury agent's orders," suggested Jack.

"And here he comes," declared Roxy.

"Sixteen" looked eager and anxious.

"Well?" he queried—"you summoned me?"

"To report," smiled Bob.

"What?"

"Man caught."

"Not Duffield Watson?"

"Just Duffield Watson!"

The agent looked as if he would like to hurrail.

"A lot of plunder—coin—and his man assistant, the coin passer," proceeded Bob.

Sixteen clapped the speaker on the shoulder with immense heartiness.

He shook hands with Jack and Buff, and bowed low to Roxy as if she was the grandest lady in the land.

"Nick Carter knows his business!" he observed, with enthusiasm.

"Always!" assented Bob.

"Nick Carter knows you know your business, too!"

"We try to merit his good opinion," continued Bob.

"It's a big catch! If you had only got the die, and the signature, and bond plates, now—"

"Oh! those trifles?" murmured Roxy, with affected carelessness.

"Trifles!"

"There they are."

"What!"

"In that bundle."

Roxy spread it open.

"Bread!" cried the treasury agent, agape.

"No, half-burned dough," corrected Roxy. "I hid in the batch—that bundle you saw Watson so anxious about, Bob."

"Yes, Roxy?"

"And there it is."

There it was—die, signature plates, bond plates—and the treasury agent gave full vent to a cheer, this time."

"What can I do for you, gentlemen—I mean lady—I mean fellows—of Nick Carter's detective school!" he cried. "What can the United States Government do for you, to show its appreciation of your

magnificent efforts in running down the mystery of the skeleton hand?"

"Why," replied Bob Ferret, simply, "bring on your next case!"

[THE END.]

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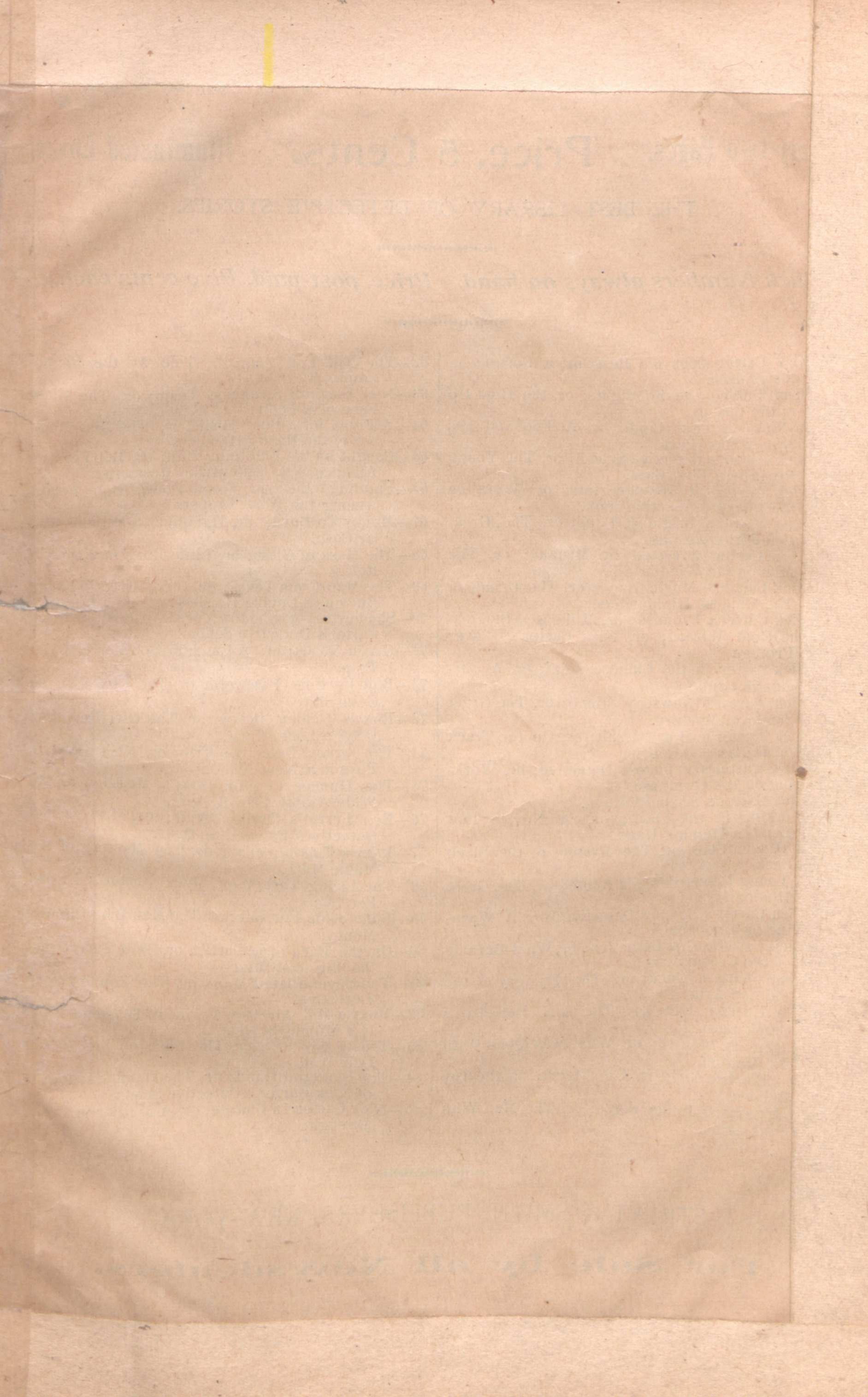
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